Ethics of "Taste, Ties, and Time"

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In recent years, social science researchers begin to realize the value of datasets from online social network websites. Numerous researches have been conducted based on those datasets, and exciting findings emerged. However, new problems appeared as well. The most famous debate is related to the "Taste, Ties, and Time" research project. This project is a network study using datasets from Facebook.com, a well-known online social network company with rich user information. Particularly, the study tracked students' public profiles from a cohort along their 3 years of study in the university, and then analyzed how their social network changed over time. After having the approval from Facebook and IRB, also with great effort to encrypt subjects' identification information, the group released the dataset to the public. Nevertheless, only several days after the releasing, the university as well as the cohort was identified without any advanced hacking skills but only simple searching. The academia was shocked. Intense debt broke out on how a Facebook and IRB approved project using public data could lead to such tragedy, and who should be responsible for it. In this article, I would like to assess this project according to Salganik's four principles of ethical research, and then give out my own judgement on whether we should use the dataset.

The first principle of Salganik's suggests the respect of people, which means to let the people decide whether they want to participate in the study, and protect people who are not able to make decision on their own. On practice, this is usually summarized as informed consent. In this particular "T3" case, there is no doubt to say, on a legal basis, that all participants were informed beforehand when they accepted the term of service from Facebook. When they signed up a Facebook account, they already give up their control of their personal information. However, what really troubled people was that subjects do not know anything about this particular experiment, and this is far more different from the traditional way: having people in the lab, where people always know they are being monitored and analyzed once they step in the lab. So for the first principle, the research group is definitely innocent according to the law, but their act is deeply doubted morally.

The second principle is called beneficence, which means to not harm people, and try to maximize possible benefits and minimize possible harms. The "T3" research team put much effort in for this principle, though the outcome was bad. According to Zimmer, the "T3" team sat up several procedures to ensure the release of data would not harm the subjects, including limiting access to initial datasets, deleting identifying information, requiring commitment on term of use for people who request datasets, and so on (2010). Unfortunately, the effort turned out to be wasted soon. The identification of the subjects was revealed easily. I believed it is very important to notice that the research group did take extreme effort to protect their subjects, but they failed because of the lack of

expertise in data science. I would not say they are not responsible for all the negative influence their project made, but we must admit that they do not have a clue of how to protect their subjects' privacy. Further, this project has been approved by IRB, which means the IRB did not foresee the possibility of leaking personal information as well. This suggests a serious flaw in the system itself. We should systematically increase the number of computational scientists into the whole social science system, so that the whole system could have a better understanding of how to properly work with digital online data.

The third principle is justice, which means how to determine who get the benefits from the research and who afford the loss caused by the research. In this "T3" research project, the team did not exclude anyone from the cohort based on their gender, race or culture preference. Also, the research group did not manipulate any process that may affect how some people in the cohort would build up their own social network. In my opinion, the research team obeyed the third principle of justice very well.

The last principle I would like to examine is the respect for law and public interest. Although this "T3" research project triggered an intense debt within the academia, we have to admit that the research itself did not break any existing law, and the study of social network does lead to a better understanding of how the society works, and that can be considered as public interest. Nevertheless, the difficult part of this story is even though everything is legal, people simply could not accept this as morally fine. I believe this dilemma would be common for many more social science research projects, and it could still be hard to decide within this decade.

If I were in this research group, I would still use this dataset. As I have analyzed before, the key element here is this legal but morally in doubt situation for the project. However, in my opinion, morality is a one-side bounded field, which only has lower bound but no upper bound. The commonly acknowledged lower bound is the law, but depending on how people believe, morality can go infinitely saint. Maybe one person could against using human as test subject at all, because he or she believes human being is so sacred that we can never manipulate human in anyway even with their consent, just like we could not take one's life even with their consent. Or, an even noble person might against animal experiment at all, because don't animals deserve to live as well? So how could we anything when morality can expand and against anything we do? I would suggest we go back to the only boundary we have, the law. As long as one experiment is not illegal, and it is in the name of greater good, researchers should be allowed to do it. Of course, it does not give any excuses to researchers to not to try their best to ensure their test subjects wellbeing.

Reference list

Zimmer, M. Ethics Inf Technol (2010) 12: 313. doi:10.1007/s10676-010-9227-5